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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a father's reflections on his daughter Charlie's failure to pass a state-mandated standardized test; reactions of both to the failure; reactions of both to emerging events; Charlie's next challenge and her looking to the future, and final thoughts and conclusions. The paper is a collaborative effort between father and daughter with sections written by one or the other presented alternately. Charlie and her father have seldom been happy with standardized tests because they lived the realities of those tests together. Charlie was placed in a low reading group in elementary school after the first such test, despite being an avid reader in her pre-school years. Competitive sports started in seventh grade and marked Charlie's drive toward athletic acceptance as an alternative source of "self" to the low placement assigned by the school. She did not learn to read well in spite of several years of instruction. After four tries and 2 years of tutoring, Charlie still failed the state's mandated graduation requirement of passing a literacy test. Despite appeals to the school board, Charlie was not allowed to graduate with her class. She passed the test the next summer after receiving different tutorial instruction, and is presently attending a community college. Five conclusions can be drawn from these lived situations: (1) Charlie's conflict of values in elementary school led to her acceptance of an outside curriculum, a conflict of learning interest that suggested that outside prior knowledge is ineffective in a school context; (2) the school neglected Charlie's reading progress, and must share the cost for cleaving to a rigid tracking philosophy; (3) the school tracked Charlie too early, left her on track too long, and promoted her test scores and stigma of tracking, reflecting her school-related disabilities; (4) the district failed to set up an effective tutoring program; and (5) a certain degree of sexism is reflected in the fact that all administrators, including the superintendent, are former male coaches and that the school district has never hired a woman administrator nor has a woman ever served on the school board. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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Mandated testing: Lived situations

The argument has essentially been that the state needs to use some form of standardized testing to evaluate student progress in one way or another and for various reasons (Anderson, et al., 1985). However, according to Owen (1985), standardized test scores are damaging far too many students. While the bad news is that testing schemes are still popular (Mosenthal, 1989), the good news is that they are being questioned. Critical theorists (Shor, 1987; Weiler, 1988) view them as outdated assessment measures serving to divide social groups and maintain social boundaries that exist in the broader culture beyond schools. Anthropologists suggest, that once classified, these students become chained to their social strata with differentiated instruction (Heath, 1983; McDermott, 1985). In effect, standardized test scores create and then reify a reality that is unassailable and clandestinely subjective. In too many instances, this leads students to accept the inevitability of their "lived-situations" (Greene, 1986).

In Texas, students must pass a mandated standardized test to graduate. While it is true they have several opportunities; the state remains vigorous in demanding they pass, and of course, some do not. This reality effects them in different ways, and has much to do with life choices after school. This test also effects the lives of parents, especially those concerned with their child's future. This article presents two perspectives about failing to meet the

Texas mandated graduation requirement. Contextually, the article is divided as follows:

1. My reflection of the circumstances leading to my daughter's, Charlie, failure.
2. Charlie's view of events when she first learned about the failure.
3. My reactions to the failure.
4. Charlie's reactions to emerging events.
5. My reactions to emerging events.
6. Charlie's next challenge and her thoughts.
7. My thoughts and conclusions.
8. Charlie looks forward.
9. Final thoughts.

Other perspectives could add to this discussion, i.e. administrators, school boards, other students, and school support personnel. They are invited to respond.

Circumstances

The two of us have seldom been happy with standardized tests because we lived their realities together. Taking these tests scared her at first, and I recognized early what was happening to her because of these tests. After the first tests the school placed her in a low reading group in elementary school, and told her that she was an ineffective reader. I had difficulty accepting this because she was an avid reader in her pre-school years. As a result, I questioned the school's sophistication of the learning

process and compared the differences in my memories of her rich pre-school learning process with what the school was telling me.

At first, I trusted schools to know what they were doing, but I was not sure about this case. However, the school leadership told me not to fret because she would eventually learn to read better. Meanwhile, a remedial reading class was what she needed most. Charlie received satisfactory grades in these remedial courses, but beyond school I could see another side emerging because she did not read much at home. At school, she battled the low group, resisted remedial instruction, and found "rich" creative ways to avoid the remedial class. This was her first contact with negative evaluation and labeling. She could either accept the grouping and turn against herself, or reject the evaluation and value herself. She rejected negative evaluation, but accepted the grouping.

Competitive sports started in the seventh grade and marked Charlie's drive toward athletic acceptance. She became involved in outside activities and devoted extended effort and attention toward sports. The low placement in school took her from friends and diverted attention from "real reading" by replacing it with structured exercises. Again, when she did not pass a reading skills test, the school placed her in a special class offering more practice on individual skills. She solved this problem by deciding not to worry about scores and remedial instruction. She did

not learn to read well in spite of several years of instruction. At home the Judy Blume books captured her attention momentarily, and she read every one she could find, but soon there were no more. Apparently, she saw reading as a difficult decoding game having little to do with the meanings found in the Blume books. Thus, she accepted an athletic peer group as a new source of self and rebelled against reading. Although the reading placement tests stopped, throughout the high school years, Charlie struggled with reading in the content areas. She read textbook assignments by searching for answers to questions at the end of the chapter. She was good at listening attentively to teachers and peers, doing a minimum of homework, and borrowing someone's notes. She read what she wanted and chose her personal strategies to do so.

Although Charlie had enough graduation credits, she still had to contend with mandated graduation requirements and pass yet another test to graduate. After four tries and two years of early morning and late afternoon school tutoring, she failed to meet the state literacy requirements and did not graduate with her class. In the following, Charlie shares what happened when she learned she was not going to graduate with her peers.

Charlie remembers

The day was May, 1, 1991, and the weekend before I just had a birthday. I was in the best mood ever. That morning I went to school. A lot was going on. At two-thirty I was

called into the office. I knew what it was about. I was getting scared and nervous. The counselor had my scores. On this test you must score a 700. I knew it was bad news because the principal was also present. They tried to let me know the bad news in a caring sensitive way, but I felt like a piece of dung! I failed that test by 13 points, only 13. I was so close to passing. My first reaction was just to say, "I'm not going to graduate! All my friends were going to walk down the aisle and get their diplomas, but not me." After I found out, I stormed out of the office and went to the bathroom, crying my eyes out. Two of the janitors, whom I knew very well, were there for me. My counselor walked in and said, "Charlie, you are going to college." I didn't give a hang about college. I wanted to walk down the aisle with the friends I grew up with. The student body and teachers found out within the hour.

After the three o'clock bell, all my friends and teachers showed that they felt my grief and sorrow. Friends hugged me. Someone sent me flowers. They shared their love for me. I just knew my dad would go ape when he found out! But he didn't; he was there for me every step of the way. My dad's reactions follow.

Encountering the board

As much as I hoped Charlie would pass, in the back of my mind I dreaded the day we would get the results. I felt her score would be close, but did not know how she would react to another rejection. As it turned out, this was not a joyous

day for us. At first, we celebrated the fact we did not "go over the hill," and run from the problem. I felt like burning the school. Instead, I drove to the school and listened again to the same packaged discourse I had been hearing for ten years from the administration. Finding little satisfaction there, I decided to talk to the school board about the social stigma of children not being able to "walk" with their peers. Although I felt this was the least I could do for Charlie, I felt talking with the board would be a waste of time, a feeling which later proved to be true.

I asked the board to allow Charlie to walk with her peers, and offered to help the district set up an effective tutoring plan designed for those students failing the test for the first time. I reasoned with the board, based on the percentage of student's failing the test, that evidently their operative tutoring plan was not effective. In other words, their in-house tutoring program was not effective because it did not help all students pass the test. Evidently, the board thought I was trying to bribe them because they responded by saying, "Thank you," and then by their silence, in effect dismissed me.

Charlie pleads her case

One thing led to another and the next thing you know there was a school board meeting. My dad spoke to them, and then it was my turn. I spoke and told them that I should walk with my class and that it was my right to do so because I had earned twenty-eight credits. This was the class I

practically started to school with, and I thought I should finish with them. I would have gotten to walk if the school board had taken a vote that night. The talk was that they would have voted 4-2 in my favor, but they didn't vote because one of the members was not there.

The principal told me the next day that there would be a special meeting the next Friday. During the week a friend of mine, Susie Jones, started a petition, by listing names from those who thought I should walk. The entire high school, a few junior high students, and many in the community voted that I should walk. Friday night came and the school board voted. It took them two hours to reach to a decision. It was a 3-3 vote, one member wouldn't vote. So, then the president of the board said to drop it. It then became a dead vote. After that I really didn't care anymore. I respected the three men who did vote for me. The others can jump off. That's pretty tough language, but that's how I felt. In the following, my dad tells you how he felt.

The solution

After I heard about the vote, I knew this battle was over and began preparing for the next one, getting Charlie over the hump of not being able to graduate with her peers. I told her that we must look to the future, somehow get through the trauma of graduation night, and find a tutor that would help prepare her to take the test again in July. On the surface, the trauma of graduation night did not materialize, Charlie was in the audience graduation night and

attended the social functions that followed. I was proud of her, but did not know how she was handing it on the inside. I had no plans past this next test that made sense to me, so we decided not to talk about failing again. We put all our eggs in one basket, maybe a new approach would prove to be more effective for her than the old approaches, and prepared economically to meet this new challenge. Deep inside however, about all I had was a hope. I yearned for a new face, and a new and effective tutoring approach; one to help Charlie pass the state's literacy exam. As Charlie explains, my hopes were realized.

Charlie's next challenge

The summer began and I drove ninety miles to tutoring Monday and Wednesday, from ten in the morning to noon. I thought I was going to go crazy because I never sat for two hours straight learning about reading. Back in high school we had tutorials only for forty minutes, twenty before and twenty after school. There were only four of us in the tutoring class. My teacher was from Algeria, Africa, but teaches somewhere in Ft. Worth. The first day he said, "Don't worry. You will pass." He knew what was up. I still don't remember his name. It was wild though. I felt like I was the smartest in tutoring class. We would argue back and forth. He would show me one way and I would show him another. He kept talking about zones. I never did figure that one out, but he was the best teacher I have ever had. He was great. The next test day came, it was July 18, 1991

and I had to take it. I was still scared because I knew what was up again. There were more students taking this test than there was in my whole high school. I left the test thinking that I had done a good job. About two weeks later my old coach who is now the new high school principal phoned me and said that I had passed. Boy was I happy, and so was my dad. I passed with a 742. After that I got my act together and went to check out a community college.

Charlie looks back

I'm in a community college now and happy even though I have to drive two hours each day to get there. I have passed one semester and made the basketball team as a walk-on. Today, I live in our home by myself, because my dad has left Texas to teach. I feel good about myself because of what I have accomplished since passing that test and especially so because my dad trusts me enough to let me live in our home by myself. Things are tough in the real world, but somehow I feel like a million dollars now that I don't have to face high school mandated tests anymore. My high school diploma says the same thing as my friends, and I have it on the living room bookshelves so that I can look at it time anytime I want to. Dad says that I will have to pass more tests in order to become a college junior, but I have faith in myself that I can do that. One thing he taught me is that taking the test over helps you become better at taking tests. I guess if adults have to take tests the rest of their lives, the more of them I take the better adult I will be.

Reflections

Five conclusions can be drawn from these lived-situations. First, Charlie's conflict of values in elementary school led to her acceptance of an outside curriculum, a conflict of learning interest that suggested outside prior knowledge is ineffective in a school context (Cazden, 1985). Willis (1981) suggests that learning forms in the process of students rebelling against the institution that has dominance over them. In this case, the motivation for reading was present early, but the school revoked it through a system of tracking based on testing. As a result, her desire to be an athlete affirmed her presence of motivation and external rebellion against skill-based instruction.

Second, the school neglected Charlie's reading progress, and must share the cost for cleaving to a rigid tracking philosophy. Rist (1970) defines tracking as separation for social purposes, and Rosenthal (1985) calls it the cumulative self-fulfilling prophecy. Regardless, Goffman's (1986) stigma of detachment was present throughout her school life, an impairment she carries into adulthood.

Third, the school tracked Charlie too early, left her on track too long, and promoted her test scores and stigma of tracking, reflecting her school-related disabilities. In one study, Allington (1980a, 1980b) found children in high-ability reading groups read two to three times as many words

as children in low groups. In effect, grouping and standardized test scores create and then reify a reality that is unassailable and clandestinely subjective.

Fourth, the district failed to set up an effective tutoring program. This conclusion is reached by the fact that the summer following Charlie's last semester she encountered a tutor demanding high expectations (Rosenthal, 1985). It is evident that he introduced her to alternate ways of learning (Vygosky, 1978), and with her made progress whereas the school sponsored tutoring program did not over a two year tutoring time.

Fifth, the school district is over eighty years old and a woman has never served on the school board, nor has it ever hired a woman administrator; all administrators, including the superintendent, are former male coaches. Only in 1989 did the board feel it necessary to place a woman in even a quasi-leadership role, a counselor. Charlie does talk about two janitors being there first for her, but surely they are not paid to counsel students. These choices clearly are not born of economic recession because the district lies in a mineral-rich area, but may be grounded in a certain definition of sexism, the "good-old-boy" network. These circumstances lead to the notion that this district can do better by its female students.

Charlie looks to the future

I've got plans for the future. Just because I had trouble with that test is no sign I should just give up. I

plan to finish the community college and transfer to a four year college in Texas. If those plans do not work out, I have other options. I can finish the community college and go where my dad is for my final two years. If I do that, I will find a job to help support me and study hard. I do intend to finish college, and that's that for now.

Final thoughts:

The two of us got over the first mandated hurdles, and are better prepared for the next ones. There is little we intend to do about the conclusions discussed earlier; that battle has been fought. It did not go the way we wanted, but we won anyway. The school district still has the same problems, but our problems are now future challenges. There is much we can and are doing about the future. Charlie says it best, "I do intend to finish college." I intend to help.

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